

Dialogue

Our Own Liberation: Reflections on Hawaiian Epistemology

MANULANI ALULI MEYER

The Ocean Imaginary

SUBRAMANI

Responses

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An Interview with Subramani

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David and Goliath: A Response to “The Oceanic Imaginary”

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Subramani asserts that the forces of globalism must be resisted by Pacific intellectuals and writers. He says they can do this primarily by using vernacular languages and epistemologies, the result of which is a change in the locus of power, from without to within. The emergence of a new language of critique that does not mimic that of the west, an integrated approach to the pursuit of knowledge, the refusal to treat literature as a commodity, and the empowerment of the marginalized (what Subramani calls the “subaltern”), are some of the benefits that will arise when Pacific intellectuals and writers realize that where they are should be the center of their universe.

According to Subramani, there are three variables—the nation-state, diasporic communities, and the global paradigm—that stand in the way of realizing the agenda he has outlined. To overcome these obstacles to the production of new epistemologies, Subramani provides examples of how intellectuals and writers can deal with opposing forces so that they become allies in the struggle. For example, he cites the contributions of intellectuals to constitutional reform in the aftermath of Fiji’s first and second military coups in 1987 (since then there has been another in 2000), the ways in which several Pacific writers explore the experiences of displaced Pacific Islanders in their fiction, and the role of the University of the South Pacific in the creation and promotion of Pacific literature, the teaching of Pacific languages, and the promotion of the visual and theater arts.

Essentially, Subramani proposes the construction of a body of knowledge rooted in and about Oceania that encompasses its “philosophies, cartographies, languages, genealogies, and repressed knowledges.” This idea is not new. Albert Wendt’s 1975 essay “Toward a New Oceania,” early writings in the journal *Mana* by Marjorie Crocombe and others, and more recently Epeli Hau‘ofa’s essay “Our Sea of Islands” (1994) speak of the same concerns. Two other articles in this issue (by Gegeo and Meyer) have similar themes. According to Subramani, the greatest threat to such

a Pacific-based epistemology is the global paradigm. It is a great threat, although other factors may be just as important, if not more so.

Colonization of the mind is the biggest obstacle to a Pacific-based archive of knowledges and epistemologies that are not dominated by outside influences. The historical fact is that Pacific nations have modeled themselves on their colonizers, even though many have been independent for decades. Education, religion, politics, economics, health, and even fashion, are oriented toward the foreign. Pacific lifestyles are so dependent on foreign goods and services that even in remote Rotuma, where there is no tourism industry, the local inhabitants expect to be paid in monetary terms when they assist their neighbors in house-building or garden work. The Islanders are now so dependent on western goods such as sugar, flour, salt, soap, and kerosene that whenever supplies run out, complaints can be heard all around, as though life is impossible without these foreign items.

The production of non-Eurocentric epistemologies remains a dream for intellectuals and writers. The words “intellectual” and “writer” had no equivalents in the Rotuman vocabulary until after contact, a fact that underlines their foreign origins and the difficulties inherent in trying to capture traditional systems of thought in English. It is easier to be Pacific-based when dealing with ancient practices that are being revived. The more alien these practices are to the western frame of mind, the more likely they will be Pacific-centered. The traditional farming systems or the voyaging traditions of the *H k le’a* are more likely to be deeply rooted in Pacific epistemologies than the fictional worlds created by recent newcomers to the literary scene in the Pacific—not only because such postmodern fictions are written in English, but because they are grappling with contemporary issues that are informed by global trends, systems, and knowledges. Further, the fictions of older writers such as Epeli Hau’ofa, Albert Wendt, Patricia Grace, Witi Ihimaera, and Hone Tuwhare are naturally more rooted in Pacific epistemologies because their authors’ experiences of Pacific cultures and languages are more profound and intuitive. These writers are more concerned with meaning than with “the pleasures of form, the playful, and the pastiche,” which Subramani sees as typifying the postmodernist writings of younger Pacific Islanders whose roots are not as deep in the traditional cultures of their characters.

Subramani calls for modes of representation other than modernism, postmodernism, and realism; he sees the works of younger Pacific writers as opening up new possibilities in modes of representation and inviting

new theories and new ways of viewing the Pacific. At the same time, he warns against the commodification of literary output for money and power; he also invites writers to work in as many of the subaltern languages as possible in order to better represent the communities they belong to as well as give voice to marginalized groups. Subramani has even written a novel in Fiji Hindi to make his point.

It is telling that in my interview with Subramani (also in this issue), he said that in spite of the freedoms and the authenticity in voice he has discovered in writing a novel in Fiji Hindi, he will revert to writing in English in future. This curious decision makes me wonder, Is it because he sees English as the “lingua franca of money and power”? Perhaps his reason for reverting to English is that as an intellectual, although he may be able to write in the voice of the subaltern, he (like most writers) can never fully articulate their sensibilities and worldviews. This should remind us writers that even when we write in our own language, our ability to truly capture emotional truths of that reality is not a given. So much depends on our proficiency in that language, our sensitivities to the seen and unseen worlds of the communities we write about, and the power of our imagination. It is possible that one’s calling may be to write in English, and to encourage others more gifted in the vernacular (or other kinds of media) to produce alternative “texts,” all of which should add up to a more comprehensive view of a culture.

The visual arts and performance (theater and dance) are also arenas in which subalterns need not feel marginalized simply because they do not speak English. At the University of the South Pacific, where Subramani teaches, is the newly established Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture. Its director, Epeli Hau‘ofa, with the help of the Niuean artist John Pule, has created a venue for young men and women (some of whom are from the nearby villages) to acquire voice through their visual art. Drawing from Pacific mythology, the environment, and contemporary concerns, as well as their imaginations, these young artists are modifying what Subramani refers to as the “English language’s monopoly on representing Oceanic peoples.”

Similar exciting work is also happening at the Oceania Centre in the area of music and dance, where new forms that fuse past and present are being created, including a new performance genre Hau‘ofa calls “modern mythmaking.” The establishment of a theater building as well as a chair in theater arts in the Department of Literature and Language opens the possibility that a unique Pacific type of theater—one that draws heavily

from the oral and performative traditions of the Pacific and not from western theater—might emerge in the future.

Filmmaking is another medium in which subalterns can represent themselves in their own language. When subtitled, such films can be made accessible to the rest of the world. Intellectuals and writers involved in this medium will find themselves becoming more and more engaged with their own communities instead of being distant observers from their ivory towers in the halls of academia. Part of the reason is that film (like theater and dance) is a collaborative process involving many talented members of a community, unlike writing which is, for those who come from group-oriented communities, an antisocial activity. The irony is that video and film are usually seen as Hollywood media, perhaps because they're more expensive and few people have the resources or technical know-how. Yet in many ways they are closer to the oral nature of Pacific cultures than is the written word (Tupou 2000). So how can this technology be used in ways that are compatible with "fragile local economies"? This is a key question that everyone concerned with development in the islands must ask themselves every time they consider the introduction of new technologies or foreign ideas. When this question is asked, it always leads to the answer that the process is just as important as the end product. In the case of filmmaking—now made more accessible to independent artists because of the digital revolution—it will mean creating alternative models of filmmaking that are custom-designed within, by, and for specific island cultures.

The most revolutionary site for Pacific Islander representation in the global arena is now the Internet, particularly the use of websites by different nations or organizations to represent themselves as well as disseminate information (Howard 1999). When first introduced, the use of email was resisted by many Islanders, including intellectuals and writers, who viewed the phenomenon as another instance of the globalizing tendencies of the imperial west. Now most have succumbed and cannot imagine life without their email. Pacific nations have also created their own websites, often with little discussion or debate on the cultural politics of the Internet, or the philosophical underpinnings that drive this new technology. Obviously there are advantages as well as drawbacks in the employment of this medium, a reminder that resistance (as suggested by Subramani) should not always be Islanders' response to globalism. In some instances, the response should be to monitor, influence, modify, and, in a few cases, adopt without revision.

In his paper, Subramani's most important challenge is how to manage the global and local space of creativity so that intellectuals and artists are not swallowed by the global paradigm. He writes of the tidal wave of globalism that threatens to demolish island cultures with "fragile local economies." This reality about islands seems to run counter to the notion that Oceania is "vast" and "expanding," which he invokes from Hau'ofa's influential essay "Our Sea of Islands." Although it is true that the Pacific Ocean is the largest in the world, it is also true that low-lying coral atolls and small volcanic islands like Rotuma, which pepper the Pacific Ocean (and are under threat from rising sea levels), are some of the smallest in the world. The image of the vast Pacific Ocean with its rising sea levels is an apt metaphor for the threat that globalism poses for most of the Pacific Islands.

Like the majority of Pacific Islanders I know, I see many advantages in being small, even dependent. Indeed, interdependency has been a feature of the Pacific way from time immemorial. Because size is relative and human beings are human beings, whether they live on continents or islands, the tensions of "small versus large, indigeneity and introduced, identity and difference" are not alien to Pacific communities as Subramani claims. The presence of these tensions makes life in the Pacific interesting and potentially volatile at the same time; they can either be embraced and celebrated or become the causes of conflict and division.

The military coups of Fiji in 1987 and the siege of parliament by rebels in 2000 are good examples of how these tensions, if not addressed openly in a country's education system, can fester, build, and erupt in antisocial behavior, even the overthrow of democratic governments. As I write this paper, a group of rebels in the Solomon Islands has just carried out a "copycat" military coup, demonstrating that the living rooms of Pacific Islanders have already been invaded by global images of gun-toting terrorists from poorer nations who believe that holding one's enemies hostage is the way to resolve grievances, real or imagined. Reactions of the international community to these interruptions of law and order further expose the interdependency of the world's nations, as well as the potent forces that can be brought to bear on "fragile local economies" by powerful nations such as Australia or the United States of America.

How then should we Islanders arm ourselves against the forces of globalism? For most of the Pacific islands, the first step is to accept that they are islands in the sun and small in terms of the land mass they occupy. The sea of Oceania may be vast, but no one I know is fighting for a piece

of the ocean to build a house on. Instead, everyone wants a plot of land they can call their own. Having accepted the challenges and pleasures of small islands, the next step is deciding how to respond to the tidal wave of globalism. Like small David in the Bible, Islanders need not fear the vast Goliath of globalism as long as we are prepared. The best protection is for us to know ourselves: our strengths, weaknesses, and potential. Once we know these, we can look Goliath straight in the eye, unafraid to call this monster by its name and, if need be, bring it to its knees with the smooth stones we carry in our slings. When we know how to strategize, we will be better able to protect ourselves as necessary. Not to do so is to stand by and watch as our tiny islands are swallowed, not only by the rising sea levels of our own Pacific Ocean, but also by the tidal wave of globalization.

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